# Realistic HDR Results with Nik HDR Efex Pro

### by Photographer Raymond Klass

One of the newest additions to the digital photographer's toolbox has been the ability to merge several exposures into a single image that would otherwise be beyond the limits of the modern camera sensor.  HDR imaging isn't actually a new technology – it's beginnings trace back to traditional black and white photography.

Ansel Adams used film development time and temperature to expand or contract the range of light recorded on film.  If you were a chrome shooter, you likely remember using graduated neutral density filters – which helped control the light hitting the film by darkening a bright area of the image.  These techniques all address the same issue that modern HDR software does – there's simply a limit as to how wide a range of lights and darks can be recorded – whether it be on film or on a sensor.

Nik's new HDR Efex Pro is simply another tool to solve an age-old problem, how to capture images that represent what our eyes saw.  In two previous articles written for the October 2009 newsletter, http://www.klassphoto.com/newsletter/200910, we looked at how to create both realistic and surrealistic HDR images with the popular Photomatix Pro software.  For this article, we'll look at the newly released (October 2010) Nik HDR software, and go through an example of creating a realistic HDR image.

My first impressions using the Nik Software were quite positive.  The software is easy to use and has a simple and intuitive user interface (especially if you're familiar with other Nik filters).  It seems that the Nik software is a little easier to achieve truly believable results.  It has less of a tendency to create halos or highlighting of objects being lightened, and this helps to create more realistic final image.
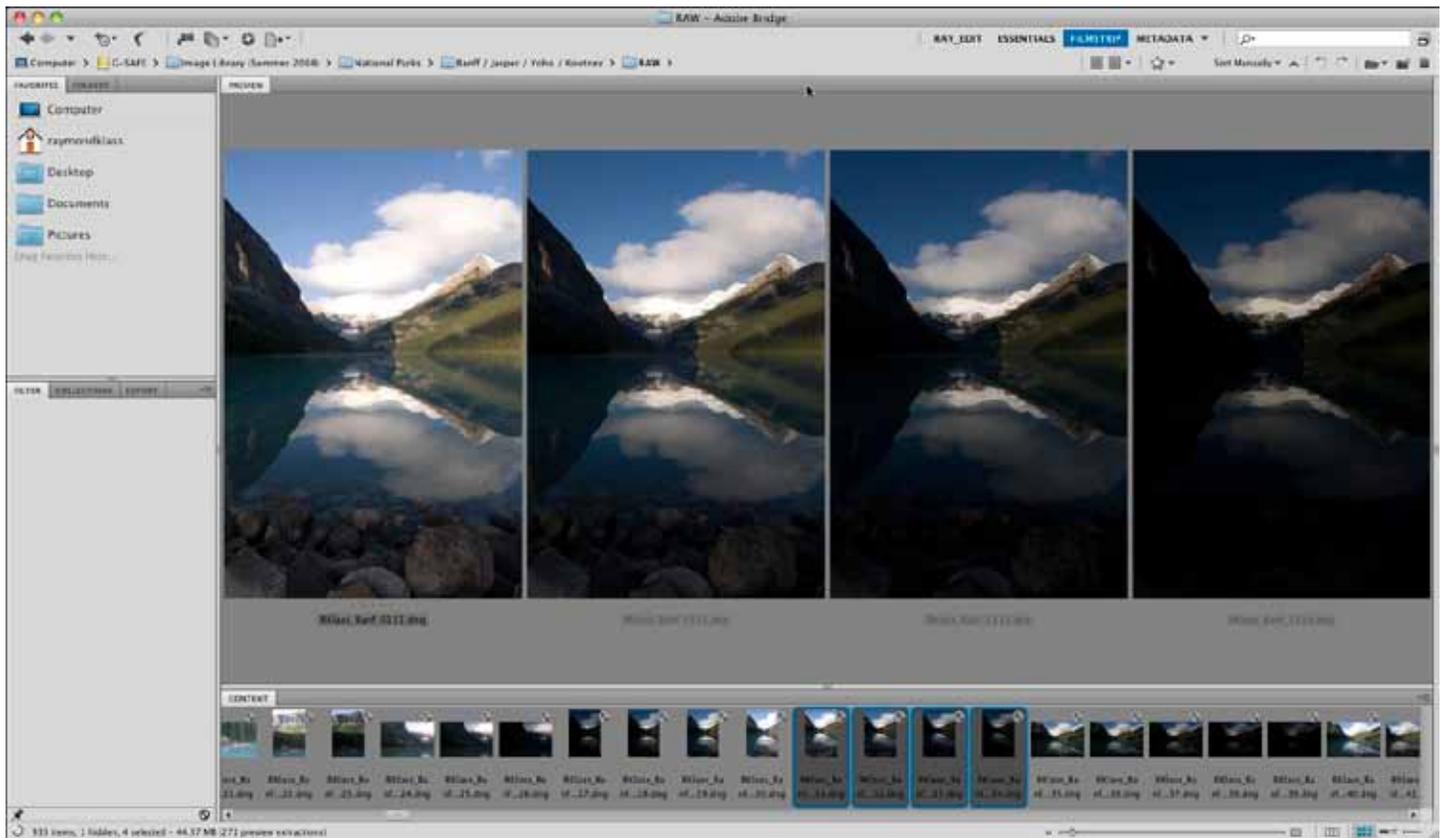
For this tutorial, I've revisited some old files from a trip to Lake Louise in Canada. The situation clearly called for shooting some HDR images. The sun had risen to my left, and is illuminating the mountains in the background, including a white glacier, while other areas remain hidden in full shadow. I shot 4 images for this scene, and bracketed in whole stops, making sure that the darkest exposure revealed information in the brightest areas.

1. I've opened the folder in Bridge with the 4 un-processed RAW files. Next, select the files all at once by clicking on the first image, then holding down the shift key, and clicking on the last image.

2. Next, we'll need to move the images into the Nik Software. I installed the plugin for Photoshop (They also have a Bridge and Aperture version if those are part of your workflow instead). In Bridge, select the Photoshop menu, then Nik Software, and finally click on Merge to HDR Efex Pro.
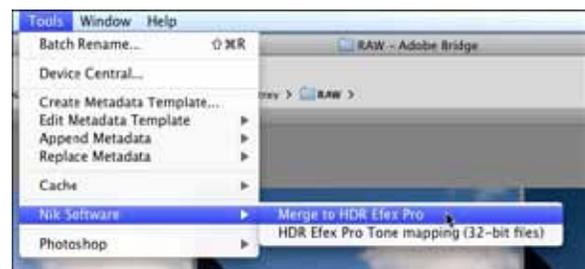


3. After clicking this option, Photoshop will automatically be opened if it wasn't already. You will see a box containing the names of the files you selected. Click each of these to turn them red, and click the checkbox next to Ghost Reduction Method (this helps to remove blur caused by moving objects like the clouds in the sky). Click on the OK button when you're finished.

4. Once the software finishes merging the images together, you will be presented with a box that should look familiar to Nik Filter users. The left side contains some quick links for pre-defined image looks. I generally leave these alone.

The right side contains a myriad of sliders and options. Most are self-explanatory, so I'll just mention the most commonly used ones in my experience. The Tone Compression slider controls how much the software works to lighten the dark areas and darken the overly bright areas. The exposure control is pretty intuitive, but I would just point out that for realistic results I commonly find myself turning the exposure down. At the bottom of this first panel section, you'll find a Method Strength slider – this address the localized contrast added by Nik, and there are several methods you can choose. I typically use Natural for the most realistic results, though I would definitely recommend playing around with the options to find what suites you.





5. One of the great things about the Nik software is that it goes beyond the global adjustments allowed for in other applications. Scrolling down the right panel, you'll find the box for Add Control Point. By selecting this, and then clicking on the image you will be able to add a point that controls a specific section of the image.

In this image, I've clicked on the rocks in the foreground. I then use the top slider to expand the circle to encompass the whole are I want to affect. The great thing about this feature is that the software will pick out just the areas that contain tones and colors similar to the area I clicked (the rocks). So, even though the water falls within my circle, I will only affect parts of the image that contain rocks within the circle.



Once I've got the circle in the right place, I'm presented with a bunch of sliders that mimic the ones found in the right column – this gives the ability to control any of these aspects of the area within the circle.

You can create as many or as few control points as you would like to target different areas of the image. This would also be a good time to experiment with the other options available in the right column.



6. Once you've got the image looking the way you want, simply click the OK button. This opens the image up in Photoshop, allowing you to use any of the Photoshop tools, or if you're finished, to save the final image.

Nik's put together a really well thought out set of tools for processing HDR images. It seems to me that their software allows you to easily create realistic and believable HDR composites. I'm happy to announce that after talking to Nik, they are willing to provide a discount of 15% on their software to photographers who use the promo code "KLASS".

Title bar: RKlass_Banf_0131_HDR @ 23.3% (Curves 4, Layer Mask/16) *

23.34%    Doc: 66.6M/187.1M